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Politics, development and the instrumentalization of (de) centralization in Sierra Leone

Abstract

The politics of decentralization reforms in Sierra Leone are both unpredictable and instructive. This article based on fieldwork and secondary data, analyses party politics within the context of decentralization, arguing that the imperatives of post-war decentralization are not necessarily embedded in technical considerations, but in processes of political compromise and accommodation. Decentralization has helped facilitate the re-emergence of the old political order, in that the country's main political parties have secured a consensus through which they have reconfigured the post-war state. This framing is useful in understanding the political economy in which fragility and political compromise continue to co-exist.

Introduction

Sierra Leone has received a great deal of attention for a variety of reasons, including its notorious civil war of the 1990s. Since the end of the war, it has gone through a series of governance reforms, including a programme of decentralization which sought to restructure the governance of the state. With over a decade of the programme's implementation, a number of studies have analysed the country's decentralization programme, focusing mainly on the technical issues relating to the ability of local councils to deliver services (see for example Edwards et al. 2015; Fanthorpe et al. 2011). While some have attempted to analyse the politics of decentralization more broadly (see for example Jackson 2005; Srivastava and Larizza 2011), the interplay of party politics within the context of decentralization has not received much attention even though it has been important in shaping the current decentralization programme.

This article is intended to contribute to narrowing the gap between the technical and political decentralization literature on Sierra Leone, highlighting the role party politics play in shaping decentralization's outcome. It argues that decentralization has helped to facilitate the reemergence of the old political order, in that the country's two main political parties, the All Peoples' Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP), have been able to secure a consensus through which they have reconfigured the post-war state on their own terms. The imperatives of post-war decentralization reforms and other channels of local development are not necessarily embedded in technical considerations, but in processes of political compromise and accommodation within the political class. Decentralization has thus accentuated a longstanding feature of Sierra Leone's patrimonial politics, in which kinship and informal networks have always shaped the configuration of the political class (Kilson 1966; Cartwright 1978). These analyses are useful in understanding the political economy in which fragility and political compromise continue to co-exist, which though illiberal, continue to sustain the peace even if temporarily.

In order to analyse the interaction of party politics within the decentralization programme, the article relies on a set of interviews with former and current central and local government officials. Active research was based on fieldwork undertaken in Sierra Leone

from August 2011 to May 2012, with intermittent fieldwork carried out between June 2014 and March 2016. A review of secondary data was also undertaken to illuminate some important political events. The article is structured in the following order: first, is the contextual framework, discussing the imperatives of decentralization in the developing world. In the second section, the article analyses the extent to which decentralization has served to provide a basis for compromise and accommodation within the political class. In the third section, the article analyses local elections, as well as the dynamics underpinning central-local political mobility, and the use of decentralization as a party consolidation strategy. The fourth section analyses ongoing attempts by the centre to hybridize reforms and recentralize power, while the fifth concludes the article.

The context

Decentralization is a governance policy on which political ideologies easily converge (Treisman, 2007). Its appeal rests on the fact that, a decentralized state can be efficient in planning and delivery of public services, as it matches citizens' preferences with service provision (Manor, 1999; World Bank, 1988; Rondinelli and Cheema, 1983). In addition, decentralization ensures flexibility in planning and implementation of development projects, providing basis for effective coordination of different development agencies operating at the sub-national level (Conyers, 2006). It also improves governments' responsiveness to local needs in the delivery of public services, thus contributing "...to the attainment of the trinity of good governance, development and poverty reduction" (Chinsinga, 2008:73).

Whereas decentralization has become a very popular governance policy, governments are adopting it for a variety of reasons, some of which are only realised after the policy has been implemented (Manor, 1999; Treisman, 2007). Although decentralization policies usually state governments' aspirations to improve citizens' participation in governance and enhance the delivery of public goods, often the reasons underwriting them rest in the political class' rationalisation of the policy's political and economic benefits (Eaton et al, 2010; Boone, 2003; O'Neil, 2003). In some countries, the decision to decentralize has been influenced by the desire to take advantage of the financial largess of Western donors (Treisman, 2007; Romeo, 2003). As Muhumuza (2008: 63) has argued, in Africa leaders have learned to adjust themselves to the dwindling resources at their disposal, accepting "... decentralization in particular, not because they were convinced about the need for fundamental change, but for purposes of economic and political survival".

A less economic narrative focuses on the political imperatives for decentralization. Indeed, as Ndegwa and Levy (2003) have argued, much of the technical literature often disregards the centrality of politics, although the design, implementation and outcomes of decentralization reforms are deeply political. Boone (2003: 360) has argued that, decentralization in Francophone West Africa has been the result of a political deal making process between central elites and local power brokers. In the case of the latest wave of decentralization reforms in Latin America, O'Neil (2003) has suggested that the arguments of deepening democracy and improving government efficiency, do not sufficiently explain the reasons behind such reforms. The instrumental nature of decentralization in the region suggests that governing political parties having "low expectations about their abilities to control power at the centre, and stable support over time may reconfigure the electoral system to take advantage of their strengths" (O'Neil, 2003: 1069).

In South Africa, decentralization became a key issue in constitutional discussions, as the country moved towards multiparty majority rule, given that minority parties whose support were concentrated in particular provinces, feared the widespread support of the African National Congress (Eaton et al. 2010). In addition, Olivier de Sardan (2009) has argued that, in many West Africa countries where political parties are financially and structurally weak, no policy or programme entrenches them in the interior of a country more than decentralization. These arguments therefore portray decentralization as a politically instrumental strategy, rather than a normative and technical concept, as most countries' decentralization policies suggest. It is within this context that the argument of this article is situated.

Political compromise, accommodation and decentralization

The phenomenon of political compromise and accommodation is not new in Sierra Leonean politics. The country's political class has always been shaped by networks linking its members through ties such as kinship and chieftaincy (Barrows 1976; Tangri 1980: 188). As Tangri (1978: 167) has argued, "...parties have been weak and febrile bodies not possessing much...at the local level. They therefore concluded alliances with factions...which they hoped would assist them to overcome these weaknesses". For instance, before independence central-local relations were such that:

From 1957 with SLPP leaders holding most ministerial posts, the position of chiefs was secured. So long as Paramount Chiefs pledged support for and rendered political assistance to the ruling party, then the SLPP government proved unresponsive to moves to unseat chiefs from office (Tangri 1980: 188).

The relationship between SLPP politicians and chiefs was thus reciprocal, and the latter were very instrumental in determining the leadership of the party in its formative years, given their close ties to the country's first Prime Minister, Sir Milton Margai (Cartwright 1978; Kilson 1966). In the 1970s and the period leading to the civil war, although chiefs remained politically important, a relatively new form of elite alignment and accommodation emerged in the form of cultural associations such as the "Ekutay", "...a northern ethnic cabal, which became a major source of patronage" (Zack-Williams 2012:19).

With the advent of the war and the overthrow of the APC in 1992, the ability of the "Ekutay" and other simmering ethnic based political networks to be self-sustaining proved weak, as they were either destroyed, or made redundant. The impacts of Sierra Leone's civil war were so destructive that by the time it ended, the country was among "weak and failing states", and the international community "ended up literally taking over the governance function from local actors" (Fukuyama, 2004:125). Fukuyama's analysis of the immediate post-war period highlights the extent to which the agency of local political actors was eroded, and what needed to be done to re-establish their leverage. In the intervening years, the situation changed rapidly, as the political class reconstructed the post-war state on the basis of political party accommodation and compromises, which have ensured that whether in opposition or in government, the country's two largest political parties – the APC and SLPP have been part of the governance of the state, even if such compromises have been unobvious, unintended and tenuous.

The “National Strategy for Good Governance” produced by the SLPP Government in 1997, a year after its election, laid the foundation for the political compromise, as it strongly highlighted the need to share power through decentralization (Government of Sierra Leone, 1997: 38) The document noted that:

Government’s determination to re-activate local Government is a manifestation of its acceptance of the fact that, the survival of a democratic government, depends upon the revival of democratic participatory institutions such as the various local authorities that exist by law in the country... (Government of Sierra Leone, 1997: 38)

However, given the escalation of the war in the late 1990s, meaningful discussions on decentralization were not to recommence until 2003. The results and follow-on actions emanating from nationwide consultations on the design of decentralization in that year, point to the ritualistic nature of consultation, and the persistent determination of the political class to subvert citizens’ preferences in furtherance of its own goals. In particular, whereas the consultations revealed a preference for non-partisan local council elections (Fanthorpe 2005; Conteh 2014a) given the public’s mistrust of career politicians, Fanthorpe (2005) has argued that “...The SLPP-led government rejected this demand, claiming, somewhat unconvincingly given its overwhelming parliamentary majority, that opposition parties had forced its hand”.

This assertion by the SLPP, contradicts the reality of proceedings in Sierra Leone’s parliament. Given that the ruling party can almost always have its way in major decisions no matter the basis of the protestations of the opposition, the claim of the SLPP that the opposition had forced its hand is improbable and unconvincing. Generally, the weakness of the opposition in influencing legislations has left its members of parliament with the only option of “walking out of parliament” when they feel their voices have not been heard (Awareness Times, 3 December, 2013; Politico, 3 December, 2013). What then explains the political class’ preference for partisan elections? A former SLPP Vice President has argued that political compromise and accommodation were major considerations, as:

There were some in the party who felt that given our majority in parliament, if we had gone for non-partisan elections, we would have dominated even traditional bases of the APC, by getting our supporters elected to the councils. But given President Kabbah’s bipartisan approach to important national issues, he wanted to accommodate the concerns of the opposition. That was why he persuaded SLPP members of parliament not to support the idea (Interview, former Vice President, Bo, February 20, 2016).

While Kabbah succeeded in getting SLPP parliamentarians not to support non-partisan elections provisions in the local government bill of 2003, the APC ironically used a legal argument to make their case for partisan elections, even if it was a subterfuge. The party argued that the 1991 constitution made no provision for non-partisan elections, noting that it represented a breach of the country’s fundamental law (Interview, former Whip APC, Freetown, November 24, 2011; Former Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, Freetown, August 27, 2011). However, on the balance of evidence, the APC’s constitutional posture suggests a smokescreen concealing the party’s actual preference for partisan elections. For a party that was the second largest in parliament, but with limited chances of forming the government at the time, partisan elections became the only means through which it could gain political power and resources while in opposition, even if at the local level (Former Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, Freetown, August 27, 2011).

The party had therefore argued that the only way political parties could gauge the country's "political temperature", was by ensuring that elections to councils were contested along party lines (Interview, former Whip APC, Freetown, November, 24, 2011; Interview, Senior District Officer, Port Loko District, June 6, 2014). Indeed, the argument of local council elections serving as a political barometer was first given credence in the 2004 local council elections, when the APC won the two councils in the Western Area, and majority in the North. The party's victories "...served as an early warning that the SLPP was rapidly losing support in the Western Area" (Kandeh, 2012:109). The winning trend of the party was further reinforced by the results of the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections, when it finally took over power from the SLPP, leaving the latter to contend with the nine local councils it controls in the south and east of the country.

With over a decade since the conduct of the first post-war local council elections, the positions of the two parties on the basis of elections to local councils have not changed, underlining the politically instrumental control which partisan elections offer them. At the time of writing, a committee charged with reviewing the country's 1991 constitution, recommended that local council elections be non-partisan (Constitutional Review Committee 2016), echoing views expressed by the public in 2003, but to which the APC and SLPP have remained opposed (Interview, Chairman, Pujehun District Council, Freetown, March 5, 2016; Interview, Constitutional Review Committee member, Freetown, February 17, 2016). Given the dynamics of the country's bipartisan parliament, few have doubts that the non-partisan election recommendation will be rejected by parliamentarians, reinforcing their strong sense of group solidarity against existential and material threats (Interview, Constitutional Review Committee member, Freetown, February 17, 2016). Underlining the parties' rejection of nonpartisan elections, is the fear of losing control over local councils, thus limiting their ability to obtain and redistribute patronage, as well as determining the outcomes of local politics, which are closely linked with national political processes.

In many ways, the basis of the political compromises and accommodation that have underpinned the country's decentralization programme, through which the APC and SLPP have ensured their survival whether in government or in opposition, has been facilitated by the country's ethno-regional voting patterns, which have persisted since the 1960s (Conteh and Harris 2014; Kandeh, 1992). In the 2012 local council elections which were conducted concurrently with the presidential and parliamentary elections, the APC won all the councils in the West Area, Northern Region and Kono District, giving it a total of 10 councils, while the SLPP won nine councils, all of them in the South-Eastern Region. Of the 456 councillors in the country's 19 councils, the APC has 253, while the SLPP has 198; the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), an offshoot of the SLPP has one councillor, while independents make up the remaining four (National Electoral Commission, 2012). The split in the number of councils and councillors among the parties indicates a sharp regional divide in voter preferences, as well as the difficulties of minority and independent candidates in gaining traction among voters, no matter their political qualifications and programmes.

The almost even distribution of the number of local councils controlled by the APC and SLPP has ensured that decentralized resources are horizontally spread across the 19 local councils, given the relatively transparent intergovernmental transfer formula established by the Local Government Finance Department in the Ministry of Finance and Economic

Development (Kargbo 2009). However, there have been claims by opposition controlled councils of unfair treatment by the central government, over extra support outside the statutory intergovernmental transfers (Conteh 2014a); as well as suspicions that the government would like to see opposition councils fail, by not strengthening and empowering them (Fanthorpe et al 2011). A frequently cited example is the amount of kilometres of roads allocated to the northern city of Makeni and other district head quarter towns in the north, under the central government's roads construction and rehabilitation programme, compared with those in the south and east of the country. As one local council deputy chairman in the east of the country noted:

There is widespread perception among local council leaders in the south and east that the APC is treating our districts and cities unfairly. Look at the amount of roads that are being done in Makeni and the speed with which they are being constructed. You will notice that it is different from what is happening here in Kenema...look at the worsening conditions of our roads (Interview, Deputy Chairman, Kenema District Council, Kenema, February 24, 2016).

Whereas such claims of central government bias are rejected by local council leaders in the north, regarding them as baseless, a nuanced analysis of how extra resources are allocated to local councils whether in government or opposition controlled areas is needed to disentangle such claims. Councils in opposition controlled areas have also sometimes disproportionately benefited from the roads programme, and as one Chairman of an opposition controlled District Council in the South has noted:

The ability of a chairman to attract resources from the central government to a council is not always determined by whether he is SLPP or APC. It sometimes depends on their ability to lobby the government. For example, my district was supposed to have five kilometres of road, but as I speak, they are going to do about 20, because I lobbied the government for my people. In fact it is hypocritical for some chairmen to accuse the APC of favouring the north given that they do the same thing when allocating development projects in their districts. They favour their home towns or villages. For me I have a number of advantages, including the fact that my father-in-law is a strong member of the APC (Interview, Chairman of a Southern Region District Council, Freetown, March 5, 2016).

The chairman's comments are instructive, providing some basis for understanding how the politics of decentralization have played out in the country, as well as somewhat counteracting the dominant narrative in the contemporary literature of a country whose political parties have contributed to building political walls between its people, regions and political class. Indeed, in some instances party allegiance is of little importance for councils when dealing with the central government. Evidence points to the importance of informal and formal networks such as being an alumnus of the country's leading schools and universities, as well as other ties within the political class. For instance, the first post-war SLPP Mayor of Bo City, Wusu Sannoh had friends in "high places" who contributed to making his tenure successful, even if they were in the APC. Sannoh and the former Minister of Local Government and Rural Development were contemporaries at the University of Sierra Leone in the 1970s, a fact that made it easier for him to relate to the ministry, at least at the policy level (Interview, Mayor of Bo City, Bo, September 5, 2011). Twice during his second term, he succeeded in rejecting transfers of the council's Environmental Health Officer and Chief Administrator to other councils by the Local Government Service Commission, something which other local council leaders were unable to do, even when they were dissatisfied (Interview, Commonwealth Governance

Advisor, Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, Freetown, March 16, 2012).

Thus, although political allegiance is important in getting access to power through local elections which are relatively less contested than national elections (Conteh 2014a), group solidarity within the political class becomes the prerequisite for success and continued accommodation. Sannoh's dealings with the government, can be contrasted with the treatment of the APC Mayor of Koidu City, Saa Emerson Lamina, who was suspended on allegations of financial impropriety in early 2016 by the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development (*Awareness Times*, March 2, 2016). While the case against Lamina appeared compelling (*Awareness Time*, February 29, 2016), it has been suggested that the vigorous reaction of the Minister to suspend him was not only influenced by the need for accountability, given the high levels of corruption in councils (Conteh 2014a; Workman 2011). As one newspaper has suggested:

the suspension of the mayor could not be unconnected to the “deep rooted malice” the minister had developed for Lamina since he took office in 2012, after he (Mayor Lamina) showed his allegiance to the now sacked Vice President Sam Sumana (*Politico*, March 1, 2016).

The case of the suspended Mayor does not only highlight the nexus between local and national politics, and how both influence each other, it also illustrates how the political class can be malevolent towards its members who fall out of favour, even within the same political party. The Mayor had been a longstanding supporter of the sacked Vice President, who was controversially removed from office in 2015, following the breakdown of his relationship with the President (*BBC News*, March 18, 2015). On the other hand, the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development had a bitter feud with the former Vice President, although all of them hailed from Kono District. As the *Politico* Newspaper pointed out:

It is not a hidden secret that VP Sumana and Diana Konomanyi do not see eye-to-eye and this division between them has cost the district a lot. What we see now are insecurity, underdevelopment, and youth violence (*Politico*, July 8, 2014).

Underlining the tensions between the two central government officials which were sometimes violently played out both at the national and local levels of politics (*Politico*, July 8, 2014), is the general quest of national politicians to ensure that they bring local political actors under their personal control, key operatives in mobilizing votes, as well as facilitators of national political actors' mobility. Thus tensions between central government officials emanating from their determination to control local politics are by no means exclusive to the two politicians and the APC. In fact the opposition SLPP has experienced its own share of the destructive effects of the merging of local and national politics, as it continues to undergo a struggle among different factions of the party that want to influence the outcomes of the elections for the party's presidential candidate in elections scheduled for 2018. Given the strategic role of local politicians in mobilizing votes, different aspirants have been courting them with varying degrees of success, in the process further dividing the party's local structures (Interview, Chairman, Pujehun District Council, Freetown, March 5, 2016).

Local elections, political mobility and party consolidation

The technical literature on political decentralization often highlights the need for the process to engender meaningful civic participation, increased human and material resources for local government. In addition, it stresses the need for a system through which locally elected officials are held accountable by local electorates for their actions (Kauzya, 2007; Smoke, 2003). Therefore, the implications for countries emerging from prolonged periods of centralization and exclusionary politics, is a radical shift from elite dominance to local empowerment, which is not always guaranteed through elections, however regular. While Sierra Leone held its first multi-party elections in the post-military rule era in 1996, the country's elections continue to be characterised by a number of electoral rituals including fraud, vote buying, violence and elite protection (Conteh and Harris, 2014) some of which have cast shadows over the conduct of local council elections. The first post-war local council elections were conducted in 2004, with wards serving as electoral boundaries, making the competition for party symbols very competitive. However, the centralised management of party structures meant that leaders of the APC and SLPP were able to redeploy to local councils, some of the "surplus political elite", who had made failed bids to become members of parliament and ministers (Interview, Chairman Bombali District Council, Makeni, September 13, 2011). Therefore, to some degrees, parties' headquarters "dictated" local candidates, while preventing capable and popular ones from contesting (Zhou and Zhang, 2009: 86).

The dominance of political party hierarchies, especially in the APC and SLPP in deciding candidates, is reflected in the words of a former APC district council chairman in the North, who noted that "in local, as in national elections, the electorate is not important in deciding who runs for elections. It is the 'selectorate' that matters" (Interview, with Chairman Bombali District Council, Makeni 13 September 13, 2011). By "selectorate" he meant a select group of party leaders who award party symbols to candidates, not necessarily on the basis of merit, but often on considerations of kin, friendship and financial contributions. This scenario indicates that certain political processes normally put in place by political parties to encourage popular participation, are basically symbolic and used by powerful politicians to create a semblance of inclusivity and empowerment. Although in the 2008 and 2012 local council elections some parties embarked on a symbolic participatory process in conducting primary elections for candidates at the ward level, the final decisions were made in Freetown (Conteh, 2014a). In what was not a rare instance in 2008, Overbeek (2008) has noted that one aspirant was reported to have paid the equivalent of US \$ 700 in a bid to obtain a party symbol.

Regardless of the challenges in deepening local democratic competition, generally elections to local councils are seen as key steps to national political careers, as councils are regarded as political training grounds (Interview, Chairman Moyamba District Council, Bo, February 23, 2016; Interview, Deputy Chairman, Kenema District Council, Kenema, February 24, 2016). Although in the post-war era political mobility has been witnessed in both downward and upward directions, the results have been mixed, and the circumstances that lead to mobility range from one's personality, ability to mobilize votes, as well as complex political deal making processes. The case of the former Chairman of the SLPP John Benjamin, is illuminating and provides an example of how political actors can transition from the centre to the local, and then to the centre. Benjamin served as Secretary General of the NPRC (Harris 2013), but remained inactive in national politics in the years following the democratic transition in 1996. He was however elected Chairman of the

Kailahun District Council in 2004, and became Minister of Finance a year later (Harris 2013), after he withdrew his support for John B. Duada the then Minister of Finance, in favour of Solomon Berewa the Vice President at the time, in a keenly contested Presidential candidate election (Interview, Chairman Moyamba District Council, Bo, February 23, 2016). Benjamin went on to become Chairman and Leader of the SLPP in 2009, and in 2013 he declared his intention of contesting the Presidential candidate elections of the party for the 2018 Presidential elections (*Awoko*, August 15, 2013).

In addition to Benjamin, there have been other local council actors who have moved to prominent positions in the national government or party structures, thus linking local and national politics. For example, the Minister of Local Government was Chairperson of the Kono District Council, and at the time of writing, was Chairperson of the APC, Kono District. In Pujehun District, “two, out of five Members of Parliament were local councillors”; and even where they have not succeeded in going to parliament, “...they have played important roles in shaping politics by becoming party functionaries especially at the constituency level, where many of them are either chairmen or secretaries” (Interview, Chairman, Pujehun District Council, Freetown, March 5, 2016). However, a successful stint as leader of a council is not always a guarantee for success at the national level, as the dynamics underpinning such transitions can be complex and frustrating. As Wusu Sannoh the former Mayor of Bo found out when he contested the positions of Vice Chairman and Leader of the SLPP, a candidate’s appeal for success should transcend local political boundaries, in political processes that do not always use competence and track records as basis for rewarding political actors. The controversial manner in which the elections were conducted forced him to withdraw from the race, even before the votes were cast (*Awoko*, August 19, 2013).

Despite the difficulty faced by some former local council leaders such as Sannoh, to break through onto the national stage of politics, there has been a merging of local and national politics, made possible by the decentralization programme; and the APC and SLPP have generally used decentralization to strengthen their party structures in ways that pre-war state configuration did not allow them. The lack of recognised and guaranteed funding sources for political parties in Sierra Leone, has given rise to “elections only parties” (Conteh and Harris 2014), with some surviving only on the goodwill of their founders, periodic donations and sometimes acting as fronts for the ruling party (*Awoko*, June 2, 2014; *Awareness Times*, January 16, 2014; Conteh and Harris, 2014). Nonetheless, for the APC and SLPP, they have been able to sustain their party structures through their control of the 19 local councils. The fact that party hierarchies decide who becomes a councillor ensures their loyalty in maintaining a local core of party organisers. Local councillors are by internal party arrangements, required to contribute part of their sitting allowances to their parties (Interviews, APC councillors, Port Loko, June 6, 2014; Interview, Deputy Chairman Kenema District Council, Kenema, February 24, 2016), funds used to keep party offices functional..

In addition to the regular contributions by the councillors, local councils are sometimes requested to contribute to election campaigns by party headquarters, a practice that places additional strains on the meagre resources of councils that are barely struggling to provide the barest minimum of services (Interview, Chairman Moyamba District Council, Bo, February 23, 2016). The practice also highlights a major challenge of the decentralization programme in fostering accountability, as councils’ leaders are often faced with the dilemma of appeasing their patrons in Freetown who will have to determine their

candidacy in the next election, or their mobility, while trying to ensure the availability of resources for the delivery of services.

The spectre of recentralization

Despite the strengthening of local party structures through the use of decentralization by the APC and SLPP, the former first re-elected in 2007, has simultaneously demonstrated a determination to recentralize political control, as well as local development functions, indicating a limit to the extent the central political class can accommodate local actors. The reintroduction of decentralization in 2004 was accompanied by an abolition of the office of “the colonially-inherited post of District Officer” (DO) (Fanthorpe et al. 2011: 8; Jackson 2005), a move that threatened the grip of the centre on the periphery. Before 2004, DOs supervised and coordinated the activities of chiefdoms in relation to the enforcement of law and order; presided over the election of chiefs (Fanthorpe et al. 2011), and in the one-party era, they also served as Returning Officers in national elections (Interview, former Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, Freetown, August 27, 2011). Given these instrumental purposes which the DOs served, their abolition was only reluctantly accepted by certain influential members of the SLPP government. By 2007 when the party lost power, “the need for a central government representative at the district level, to bridge the gap between chiefdom authorities and the government, had become increasingly urgent” (Interview, former Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, Freetown, August 27, 2011).

In the view of the SLPP, the abolition of the DOs created a lacuna between the central government and chiefdom authorities that could neither be narrowed by the local councils, nor could they adjudicate in disputes between chiefs and their subjects. Although the need to address such gaps had existed before the APC took over government in 2007, it was not until 2010 that a concrete move was made to bring back the Dos. Their return was precipitated by an incident between the Vice President and a Chairman of an opposition controlled local council in the south of the country. The Vice President had gone on an official visit, but had not received the traditional hospitality reserved for his status. The chairman had insisted that, he was not under any obligation to meet the Vice President, nor provide him hospitality given that he was not informed of his visit (Interview, Chairman, Pujehun District Council, Freetown, March 5, 2016).

The incident not only signalled the increasingly assertive posture of opposition controlled councils, but also openly challenged long held traditions of local government officials, demonstrating loyalty to important central government visitors. Thus, for the advisers of the local government minister, the government was losing control of the periphery, and the reaction was the reintroduction of the DOs, despite the protestations of the opposition (*Awoko*, September 9, 2010), civil society and donors (Interview, former minister of Local Government and Rural Development, Freetown, August 27, 2011). Thus in the post-war decentralization policy of 2010, the status of the local council was downgraded from that of “the highest political authority in the locality” (Government of Sierra Leone 2004:16), to “the highest development authority” (Government of Sierra Leone 2010).

While the actions of the APC government in downgrading the status of local councils illustrates ongoing central-local tensions, it also raises a number of broader policy issues relating to the current and future trajectory of decentralization, the place and role of its proponents, including the donors. One can understand the reintroduction of the DOs using

a number of perspectives. First, decentralization has become a victim of its own success (Fanthorpe et al. 2011). The argument is that, decentralization has become so successful that, the central government is nervous of its potential to undermine its hold on the periphery. On the other hand, the reintroduction of the DOs reflects donors' waning influence on government's policies and programmes, relative to the immediate post-wars years.

Additional attempts by the APC to recentralize political power and community development functions have been shrouded in recent processes, which have received bipartisan support in parliament. The first relates to revisions in the Local Government Act of 2004, which will blur local and national lines of politics, as members of parliament will become members of Ward Development Committees, (WDC) (Interview, Policy and Legal Officer, Decentralization Secretariat, August 6, 2014). This is likely to worsen the fractured relations among the political elite, with a possibility of rendering moribund WDCs, completely ineffectual. Even under the existing arrangement, the relations between chiefs and local councillors in the WDC have been adversarial as both claim superiority over the other (Interview, Director of Local Government, Freetown, August 17, 2011). Thus, adding MPs to the WDC would make them spaces for permanent contestations, instead of development planning.

The second process relates to the provision of constituency development fund (CDF) for parliamentarians (*Politico*, January 21, 2014; *Cocorioko International*, August 20, 2014), that had been made redundant even before the 1996 elections. Whilst the amount paid to MPs is negligible in relation to that controlled by local councils, the move has however raised eyebrows as to the actual motives of the government. Members of parliament have defended the initiative and sought to allay public fears by arguing that the CDF will complement the work of the councils, rather than displace them (Interview, Member of Parliament, Constituency 08, Freetown, July 9, 2014). This however has the potential to further complicate a local development space, in which local councils, NGOs, chiefs and other actors, have constantly challenged, rather than complement their work, often in an uncoordinated and dysfunctional fashion (Conteh 2014b). A study tour of MPs to Kenya to study how that country manages its CDF (*Standard Digital*, February 20, 2014; *Kenya News Agency*, February 20, 2014), perhaps exemplifies the confusion and lack of understanding on how to proceed with what local councils have described as a duplication (Interview, Chairman Local Council Association of Sierra Leone, Port Loko, July 31, 2014).

One consideration influencing the reintroduction of the CDF is that the representational role of MPs does not necessarily confer legitimacy, unlike their ability to directly provide tangible public goods for constituents. This is rooted in the pre-war role of MPs, when they were considered champions of community development. On the other hand, it is plausible for one to analyse the CDF within the context of an executive, that has always been willing to extend patronage to persons or groups it perceives as potential challengers, thus co-opting them (Conteh and Harris 2014). Indeed, the fact that the CDF has replaced the now defunct constituency facilitation fund (CFF), whose purpose was questioned given that it was paid into the personal accounts of MPs; and for which they never accounted (*Sierra Express Media*, April 14, 2014), illustrates that the change might only be a legitimization process, intended to assuage public concerns over the use of public funds allocated to MPs. Whatever is the rationale for the reintroduction of the CDF, it is likely to

undermine the community development function of local councils; intensify local actors' conflict, and further solidify the centre's grip on the periphery.

Conclusion

Decentralization, as we have seen, has not fundamentally changed Sierra Leonean politics. In fact it has led to the re-emergence of the old order, in that it has facilitated a form of political accommodation underlined by a compromise that has by and large stabilised the political class, with its functionality reflecting pre-war governance practices. This contradicts donors' narrative on the rationale for democratic decentralization in Sierra Leone, which deemphasizes the imperatives of politics, portraying it as a governance reform and peace consolidation strategy implemented by the SLPP government, with the aim of addressing the causes of the war – “exclusion and deprivation of the rural masses”, as well as improving social services (Zhou 2009: xviii; Srivastava and Larizza 2011; Edwards et al. 2015).

However, the extent to which the current political compromise and accommodation will sustain the peace in the long term is unclear, but will somewhat depend on the political class' ability to extend to the general citizenry, that which it has secured for itself. Underwriting the ongoing accommodation and compromises in the post-war era, is the realization that the ruling political class' interests and those of other actors, are not always mutually exclusive. Although in some ways post-war politics have been characterised by a “winner-takes-all” mentality, the APC and SLPP have been able to work out an unwritten, but workable political compromise, through which they have ensured that, at any given time, each party whether in government or in opposition, controls power even if only at the local level. The compromise has also helped them retain control over the periphery and local party structures, while guaranteeing local notables limited autonomy and patronage.

The processes of accommodation and compromise are also important in understanding the dynamics that influence the production of some public goods across the country. Whilst the general public perception of regional development in opposition areas is one of central government bias against them, such claims do not always reflect the fuller picture of the undercurrents determining the spread of development projects. For example, the relatively “flexible management” of the roads programme, plausibly the result of the inapplicability of rules and regulations even where they exist, has made it possible for some districts in opposition controlled areas to disproportionately benefit from the programme. This is especially true in opposition districts where local leaders consider their interests intricately linked to that of the central government in what is a “win-win” strategy. Furthermore, inasmuch as party allegiances are important, a local leader's success is often determined by many other factors, other than just party allegiances. Their ability to skilfully transcend party lines, and making use of previously established networks based on alumni relationships, as well as informal links such as intermarriages linking politicians across regions and parties all play important roles in ensuring success.

Nonetheless, the manner in which the post-war state has been reconfigured, with the political class actively shaping its current form, continues to pose threats to the centre's dominance, giving rise to the need to contain local councils. The APC's reintroduction of the DOs is indicative of the centre's unease with some assertive parts of the periphery regardless of their political allegiance, a situation that has given rise to the need to perpetuate a hybridised form of local governance. This partly explains the struggles among

central government politicians over the control of local politics, in processes of political competition that continue to reflect illiberal governance features often associated with elections and the use of state power, which ultimately undermine the development of a functional democratic culture. On the other hand, the manner in which the bipartisan parliament has been able to build consensus around the CDF, somewhat illustrates the homogeneity of its interests, and a more affable relationship within the political class, than the rather exaggerated political divide often suggested by commentators. The mutual interests of its members continue to shape the trajectory of (de) centralization, while overshadowing those of the citizenry, whose tolerance for politicians' unaccountable behaviour, is yet to reach intolerable and unacceptable limits.

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